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THE CATHOLIC LAYMAN.

Ἡμεῖς οὐ θίγα ἀνὰ ἡάρουεῖς, ἀγυρ ριόεάν αἱρ ἀν ὁγαλῶν δεαῖτοῖς ὁο να δάοιμῖς.

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UNANIMITY OF THE FATHERS.

WE find in the writings of a celebrated philosopher an account of a conversation which once took place between an Indian and an European, on the subject of astronomy. The conversation began by the latter individual putting this question to the former—On what did the earth rest?—what supported it? The Indian seems to have believed as we know the Popes and the Roman Catholic Church did of old (and, perhaps, for aught we know, some of them may do still), namely, that the earth is a solid body, at rest, in the middle of the planetary system. But his answer went a step further than this. Following, probably, some legend of the Hindoo creed, he replied, that the earth rested on a great elephant. The next question put to him was, on what was the elephant supported? He answered, on a great broad-backed tortoise. His tormenting interrogator, however, was not satisfied with this reply. He pressed him to tell him what gave support to the broad-backed tortoise; and the poor Indian, thus finally driven to the wall, was forced to reply, *Something; he knew not what.*

It has often seemed to us that Roman Catholic controversialists are sometimes involved in a difficulty bearing no small resemblance to that just described, when they are asked to give some proof of the reality of the advantages which their Church claims to possess, with regard to the exposition of religious truth, and especially with respect to the interpretation of Scripture. In order to make our meaning clear, we must request the attention of our readers to the following preliminary remarks.

Roman Catholic writers are never weary of asserting that Protestants have really no rule of faith, or no principle of Scripture interpretation, except the uncertain private opinion of each individual; whereas they themselves, on the contrary, can never be mistaken in the true meaning of the Word of God, because their Church furnishes them with an uniform, infallible interpretation of it. "Whatever points of religion," writes Bishop Milner, "are not clear from Scripture are supplied and illustrated by tradition; as the pastors of the Church, who possess this authority, are always living, and ready to declare what is the sense of Scripture, and what the tradition, on each contested point, which they have received in succession from the Apostles." The Council of Trent, too, is very clear on the same point. In its fourth session, it decreed as follows—"In order to restrain unruly minds, let no person (relying on his own skill in matters of faith and morals, pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, and twisting the Word of God to his own way of thinking) ever presume to interpret Holy Scripture contrary to that meaning which holy mother Church, whose privilege it is to judge concerning the true sense and interpretation of the Holy Scripture, has held and now holds, or contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers."

By this decree it is evident, that the unanimous consent of the Fathers is made a most essential element in the interpretation of Scripture, according to the fundamental principles of the Roman Catholic Church. In order that this rule of interpretation should not be lost sight of, Pope Pius IV. took care that it should be inserted in the oath which he drew up, and which is taken to this day by all the beneficed clergy and monastic orders in the Roman communion. The words of this oath correspond very nearly with those of the decree of the Council of Trent just quoted—"I acknowledge and hold the sacred Scriptures according to that sense which our holy mother the Church hath holden and doth hold (whose office it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of holy Scripture); neither will I ever receive and interpret them unless according to the unanimous consent of the Fathers."

All the Roman Catholic clergy, therefore, who have taken this oath, from the Pope downwards, are solemnly bound by it never to interpret the Word of God, unless according to the unanimous consent of the Fathers. It is not enough that they are prevented from advancing an interpretation to which the Fathers are opposed; for the oath which we have quoted goes far beyond this. They must have the Fathers on their side;—not one, or two, or three, but the whole body of them. Unless they can settle this point to their satisfaction, with regard to any disputed doctrine, their mouths are shut, and they are prevented by their oath from giving instruction upon this doctrine out of the Word of God to the people committed to their charge.

The state of the case, therefore, is this. Each individual Roman Catholic is bound to follow implicitly, and to adopt without further question, the teaching of his parish priest on all questions relating to religious truth, and especially with regard to the meaning of Holy Scripture. Bishop Milner is very express upon the necessity, as well as the advantage, of this implicit obedience. "Most likely," he writes, "the Catholic peasant learns the doctrine of the Church from his parish priest; but, then, he knows that the doctrine of this priest must be conformable to that of his bishop, and that otherwise he will soon be called to an account for it: he knows, also, that the doctrine of the bishop himself must be conformable to that of the other bishops and the Pope, and that it is a fundamental maxim with them all, never to admit of any tenet but such as is believed by all the bishops, and was believed by their predecessors up to the Apostles themselves."

This theory appears very plausible and inviting at first sight; but let us examine it a little closer. Let us bring it down from the attractive but somewhat vague generality in which it is clothed by Milner, and let us test its validity by one or two familiar examples. There is no point on which Roman Catholic controversialists are more fond of insisting than that the Church of Rome is founded on St. Peter; and in proof of this, they are never tired of quoting the well known text, "Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall never prevail against it"—(St. Matt. xvi., 18). "Surely, then" (a Roman Catholic layman may conclude), "this important passage of Scripture must be one in the interpretation of which the ancient Fathers must be absolutely unanimous. Our parish priest, Father A., is bound by his oath never to interpret Scripture except he has the old Fathers, one and all, at his back; and Bishop Milner tells me that it is a fundamental maxim with all the bishops, from the Pope himself downwards, never to admit any tenet but such as was believed by their predecessors up to the Apostles themselves. However, just for curiosity, I will look into some of these venerable old writers, to see what they say on the matter, although I am pretty sure, beforehand, that Father A.'s oath would have closed his mouth, unless he had satisfied himself, before he preached his sermon on this text in chapel last Sunday, that the Fathers were all of one mind with him."

Our inquirer prosecutes his research, and examines what the Fathers have actually said upon the

well-known text which we have quoted above. He goes, for example, to the eminent Roman Catholic writer Cardinal Perrone, and what does he find there? We will give his statement on this point in his own words:—"We distribute," saith he, "the testimonies of the fathers upon this text into seven classes." This is pretty unanimity, to begin with! But Perrone proceeds as follows:—"The first class comprehends those Fathers who understood the words of Christ in Matt. xvi. to relate directly to the person of Peter; and who so understood the passage, as to recognise that Christ conferred upon Peter preeminence and authority over the other Apostles. Of the Fathers who hold this opinion, there are *seventy-nine*." The second class comprehends those Fathers and ecclesiastical writers who expound the words of Christ "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church"—of the confession of faith made and preached by Peter. Of these Fathers there are *forty-four*."

We will not weary our readers with Perrone's enumeration of the opinions of the Fathers comprehended in the other five classes. The text is one which has been frequently discussed in our pages, and we have recently devoted several articles to the consideration of the important question of St. Peter's supremacy, in support of which this text is commonly alleged. If our readers will take the trouble of referring to the last of these articles in our number for February, they will see the opinions of the Fathers set forth at full length, and they will then be better able to judge for themselves how much unanimity there is among them on this question.

But we need not go beyond the admission of Cardinal Perrone himself. With every anxiety to represent the sentiments of the Fathers in the manner most favourable for the Roman Catholic Church upon a question which she considers of the most vital importance, he is forced to acknowledge that the Fathers interpreted the text in seven different ways. Which interpretation, then, is our friend the Roman Catholic layman to adopt? It is all very well for Bishop Milner to say that the peasant is to receive his doctrine from the parish priest, and that the priest is to agree with the Pope and bishops, and that they are to follow the unanimous consent of the Fathers. But what is to be done if there be no such thing as the unanimous consent? The earth, according to the Indian philosopher, rests on the elephant, and the elephant on the broad-backed tortoise; but, in the present case, when we come to examine the matter closely, the broad-backed tortoise itself melts away into thin air. What is there, then, to prevent the faith of the poor peasant, which Milner quietly assumes to rest on such a solid foundation, from sinking away altogether? or, if he is to have any faith at all, must he not come to the much-maligned principle of private judgment, in order to choose between the various interpretations presented for his consideration? His priest, let it be remembered, cannot choose for him; he is bound, by his oath, never to interpret Scripture unless he has the unanimous consent of the Fathers to support him. If, therefore, this consent do not exist—a point on which any well-informed layman may easily satisfy his mind—it seems clear that the parish priest can afford his flock no real assistance; and, if they are to have any fixed opinion on such a point as we have been considering—intimately related, as it is, to a most important article of Roman Catholic faith—both the people and the pastor must examine the question individually, and finally choose for themselves.

Perhaps, however, it will be said that we have exaggerated the differences of the Fathers upon the text Matthew xvi., 18, and that the seven classes into which Cardinal Perrone divides their opinions may easily be reduced to a much smaller number. Let us, then, take a second text of Scripture, which is often quoted in support of another important doctrine of Romanism—the doctrine of Purgatory; and, as before, let us see what account a Roman Catholic theologian of the greatest eminence gives of the opinions of the Fathers respecting its meaning. The passage to which we refer is as follows—(1 Cor., iii. 12): "Now, if any

* Milner's End of Controversy, p. 182. London, 1854.
† Proterea et coherenda petulantia ingenua dixerit, ut nemo, non prudenter innoxius, in rebus fidei et morum ad educationem doctrinæ Christianæ pertinetibus, sacram Scripturam ad suos sensus contorquenda, contra eum sensum, quem tenuit et tenet sancta mater Ecclesia, cuius est iudicare de vero sensu et interpretatione scripturarum sanctarum, aut etiam contra unanimum consensum Patrum ipsarum scripturarum sacrarum interpretare audeat."—Decret. Concil. Trident., Sess. IV., p. 17. Lipsie, 1852.

"Item sacram Scripturam juxta eum sensum quem tenuit et tenet sancta mater Ecclesia, cuius est iudicare de vero sensu et interpretatione sacrarum Scripturarum, admittit; nec eam unquam nisi juxta unanimum consensum Patrum accipiam et interpretabor."—Bulla Pii Quart., super forma juramenti. Canon et Decret. Conc. Trid., ut supra, p. 227.
‡ Milner's End of Controversy, ut supra, p. 160.

* In septem propterea classes sic patrum hæc testimonia distribui possunt.—Perrone, Tractatus de Locis theologicis. Tom. II., col. 322. Parisiis, 1842.
† Secunda classis eos exhibet patres et Scriptores ecclesiasticos qui, . . . exponunt eadem Christi verba, Tu es Petrus, et super hæc petram, etc., de fidei confessione a Petro edita et prædicanda, quatuor nempe supra quadraginta.—Perrone, ut supra, col. 912.

man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble, every man's work shall be made manifest; for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work, of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire." Let us now see what account Cardinal Bellarmine gives of this passage, and of the interpretations proposed by the Fathers.

"There are," saith he, "five difficulties in this passage. Firstly, What is to be understood by the builders? Secondly, What is to be understood by the gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble? Thirdly, What is to be understood by the day of the Lord? Fourthly, What is to be understood by the fire, concerning which it is said, that in the day of the Lord it will try each man's work? Fifthly, What is to be understood by the fire, concerning which it is said, 'He himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire.' If these points are explained, the meaning of the text will be clear."

We beg leave, in passing, to express our entire concurrence in the last remark of the learned Cardinal. Your "if," according to the old proverb, is a great peace-maker. Let us now proceed with the explanation.

"The first difficulty, then," says Bellarmine, "consists in this—who are the builders or architects? 1. Augustine^a thinks that all Christians are here called architects by the Apostle, and that all build upon the foundation of faith works either good or bad. Chrysostom, Theodoret, Theophylact, and Eusebius appear to me to give the same interpretation of this verse. Many other Fathers teach that none are called architects by the Apostles except the doctors and preachers of the Gospel. Jerome insinuates the same opinion in the second book of his work against Jovinian; Anselm and Thomas Aquinas adopt the same opinion, without rejecting the former one. Many of the more recent writers follow the same course, as Dionysius Carthusianus, Lyrans, Cajetan, and others."

"The next difficulty is of a more serious kind; for there are here six opinions. Some understand by the word foundation, true but unformed faith; by the gold, silver, precious stones, they understand good works; by the wood, hay, stubble, they understand mortal sins. This is the opinion of Chrysostom on this passage, whom Theophylact follows. The second opinion is, that by the foundation is meant Christ, or the preaching of the Gospel; by the gold, silver, and precious stones are meant heretical doctrines. This appears to be the meaning of the commentary of Ambrose, and also Jerome's. The third class of opinions is, that by the foundation is meant a lively faith; and that by the gold, silver, and precious stones are meant Catholic explanations; and that by the wood, hay, and stubble are meant works of supererogation. This is the opinion of St. Augustine."

We pause here for a moment to direct the attention of our readers to the foregoing illustration of the unanimity of the Fathers. The very same phrase of St. Paul's is explained by some Fathers to mean heretical dogmas, and by another, Catholic explanations of the truth. This is clearly no trifling difference of opinion; and what is the parish priest to do, who has sworn that he will never interpret Scripture except with the unanimous consent of the Fathers? But let us proceed with Bellarmine's statement.

"The fourth opinion is of those who understand by the gold, silver, &c., good works, and by the wood, hay, &c., venial sins. This was the opinion of Pope Gregory the Great^d and others. The fifth opinion is of those who understand by the gold, silver, &c., good hearers of the Gospel, and by the stubble, bad hearers. So Theodoret and Eusebius, who is well refuted by Chrysostom. The sixth opinion, which we prefer to all the rest, is, that by the foundation is to be understood Christ, as he was proclaimed by the first teachers of the Gospel. By the gold, &c., is meant the useful doctrine of other preachers who teach those persons who have already received the faith. By the wood, hay, &c., is to be understood the curious or strange doctrine (not necessarily heretical or bad) of those preachers who preach to Catholic people in a Catholic spirit,^e but without that advantage and usefulness which God requires."

Upon this last statement of Bellarmine's we will only make the remark, that we fear many of the sermons preached to our Roman Catholic friends, however "Catholic" in spirit, come under the Cardinal's censure of being neither advantageous nor useful; and, further, that although Protestant ministers have never bound themselves, as Bellarmine did, to follow the unanimous consent of the Fathers, they would, nevertheless, agree with him in thinking that our Lord Jesus Christ is the only true foundation of a sinner's hope, according to the statement of the Apostle in the eleventh verse of the chapter—"For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus

Christ." To proceed, however, with the Cardinal's explanation:—

"The third difficulty is concerning the day of the Lord. Some understand by the word day the present life, or the time of tribulation. So Augustine,¹ and Pope Gregory the Great.^m All the ancients, however, appear to have understood by that day the day of the last judgment, as Theodoret, Theophylact, Anselm, and others. The fourth difficulty is, what is the fire which will try each man's work in the day of the Lord. Some understand the tribulations of this life, as Augustine and Gregory, in the places referred to; but this opinion we have already rejected. Some understand eternal fire; but this cannot be true, for that fire will not try the building of gold and silver."

Some understand by this fire the pains of purgatory; but this cannot be the true explanation.ⁿ Firstly, because the fire of which we are speaking is to try every man's work, of what sort it is; but the fire of purgatory does not try the works of those who build gold and silver. Secondly, the Apostle clearly distinguishes between the work and the workmen, and says of the fire, that it will burn the works, not the workmen; for he says, 'if any man's work shall be burned;' but the fire of purgatory, which is a true and real fire, cannot burn the works, which are transient actions, and have already passed away. Finally, it would follow that even the most holy men pass through the fire; for all must pass through this fire of which we are speaking. But it is manifestly false that all pass through the fire of purgatory, and are saved by fire; for the Apostle here clearly says that it is only those who build wood and hay, that are to be saved as by fire. And, moreover, the Church has always been of opinion that the holy martyrs and infants dying after baptism are at once received into heaven without ever passing through the fire. It remains, therefore, that we must say that the Apostle here speaks of the fire of the severe and just judgment of God, which is not a purgative or punishing fire, but one which tries and examines. So Ambrose explains the passage in his work on the Psalms, and Sedulius agrees with him."

"The fifth and last difficulty is, what is meant by the fire, when the Apostle says, 'he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire.' Some understand the tribulations of this life; but this cannot be consistently maintained; for then, even the man who built gold and silver would be saved as if by fire. Wherefore, Augustine and Gregory, who are the authors of this opinion, did not themselves find it satisfactory, and advanced another, about which we will speak hereafter."

"Other Fathers think that the fire here spoken of means eternal fire, as Chrysostom and Theophylact; but this opinion we have already refuted."

"It is, therefore, the common opinion of divines, that by the word fire, in this passage, is to be understood some purgatorial and temporal punishment, to which men are adjudged after death, who, in the particular judgment, are found to have built wood, hay, and stubble."

We feel that some apology is due to our readers for the great length of the foregoing extract; but we considered that the only way of enabling them clearly to understand what is meant by the favourite phrase, "the unanimous consent of the Fathers" was to adduce, from the highest Roman Catholic source, the actual sentiments of the Fathers upon an important passage of Scripture, expressed almost in their own words. For our own parts, if we may venture to express our humble opinion upon the subject at issue, we think that Bellarmine argues much more clearly when he states what is not than when he states what is the meaning of the Apostle's words. We commend to our readers' special attention the argument by which the learned Cardinal proves that, whatever may be meant by the fire, in the 13th verse, it cannot mean the fire of purgatory, and then request them to observe the cool manner in which he assures, without any argument at all, that the very same word fire, in the 15th verse, must mean the fire of purgatory, as well as his astounding assertion, that this is the common opinion of divines—an assertion which can be so signally refuted from his own pages. Bellarmine, however, is candour itself, compared with Bishop Milner, who, relying, one must suppose, upon the ignorance of his readers, had the courage to ask (in speaking of the Scriptural proof of purgatory derived from 1 Cor. iii. 13), "What other sense can that passage of St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians bear, than that which the Holy Fathers affixed to it?"^o when he must have known right well that even Bellarmine had been forced to acknowledge, two centuries before, that scarcely any two Fathers interpreted the passage in the same sense."

In conclusion, we invite our readers to observe the cool manner in which Bellarmine throws overboard the opinions of eminent Fathers like Augustine and Chrysostom when it suits his purpose to do so. And we trust that the remarks which have been made will enable them to form a juster conception than they have hitherto done of the solidity of the "broad-backed tortoise," the unanimous consent of the Fathers, on which, according to Bishop Milner and others, the unlearned Roman Catholic may, in perfect confidence and trust, rest his faith in the true interpretation of Scripture."

ASSUMPTION OF THE VIRGIN.—NO. II.

A CORRESPONDENT in our last number has invited us to give some additional information on the subject of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. On the 15th of August in each year the Church of Rome celebrates a festival in commemoration of the fact (?) that after the death of the Blessed Virgin her body was not mingled with the dust, like that of other mortals, but was, in the presence of all the Apostles, taken up by the angels into heaven. As the Scriptures do not record this wonderful event, it is not unnatural to ask on what uninspired authority the belief in it rests; and we endeavoured in a former number (Sept., 1854, vol. iii., p. 108) to do our best to satisfy this reasonable curiosity. We there showed that for full seven hundred years after the death of the Virgin Mary not a single historian or ecclesiastical writer appears to have ever heard of the story which the Church of Rome now accepts as unquestionable truth, and we gave John Damascene, who flourished in the middle of the eighth century, as the earliest author in whose works the tradition could be found. We do not mean to go over the same ground now, and referring to our former article such of our readers as may like to see the proofs that this story was unknown to the ancient Church, we shall in this article enable them to see how it came at length to be believed, and by what arguments the belief in it was at first defended."

But, perhaps, we had better begin by trying to come to an understanding with our readers what is the proper kind of arguments for proving the truth of any story, miraculous or otherwise. Our belief is that the right way of proving a fact is by testimony of some kind. What we like best is, if we can get hold of a trustworthy eye-witness of the facts asserted: when we can find a person deserving of credit who tells us that he was himself present, and saw the things happen which he tells us of. But when we cannot get this, which is the best kind of evidence, as we are not sitting in a court of justice we are not so particular as to refuse to listen to second-hand versions of a story. No doubt a story is apt to gain a little in its carriage, but still if it has only come through few hands, and those tolerably trustworthy, we are ready to hope that the story has not been very much disguised on the way. These are what we should call good arguments for our belief in any event, and now we shall tell what we think bad ones."

We should think it not a sufficient proof of a miracle merely to tell us that God could do it, unless, indeed, He had said that He would do it, or unless some one was able to say that he had seen or heard it take place. If, indeed, after a story has been otherwise well proved men cavil at it because it contains an account of miracles, then, no doubt, it is a good plan to remind them of the omnipotence of God, and of the folly of attempting to set bounds to His power. But if the argument from God's power stands alone, it is too elastic to be worth much. For, as there is nothing in the world which He cannot do, this argument might be applied with equal success to both sides of every question; and if we were bound to believe that God actually has done everything which He could do, there is no tale that can be invented which we might not on these principles be called on to accept as true history."

Neither do we think it sufficient reason for believing in an alleged miracle that the occasion seems one on which it appears to us that God might very fitly interpose. This is well worth taking into consideration, if there be first produced some evidence that He really has so interposed; but in the absence of such evidence we do not think ourselves qualified to make our notions of fitness and propriety the standard of God's conduct. If we had the government of the world there are many occasions when we should be tempted to work a miracle: when, for instance, we see good men suffering under undeserved calamity, and wicked men blaspheming God, and to all appearance nothing the worse for their misdeeds. It was by this kind of argument that a sect of ancient heretics persuaded themselves that our Lord did not really suffer and that He was not really crucified for us. It revolted all their notions of fitness that the Son of God should give up His body to wicked men to abuse it at their pleasure, and so they settled it that God must have worked a miracle, and preserved His Son from death, leaving a phantom form in the power of His enemies. This is just one example out of many that might be given how far men's fancies may lead them astray if, in place of being content humbly to inquire what God has done, they choose to make themselves judges of what He must and ought to have done, and regulate their belief accordingly."

Now, we shall show that it is on this bad kind of argument that the story of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin exclusively rests; that those who first put it forward did not appeal to testimony of any kind, either in Scripture or tradition, and that they grounded their belief merely on their private speculations that it would be a very proper kind of miracle for God to work. In the appendix to one of the volumes of the Benedictine edition of the works of St. Augustine there is contained a little tract on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin (see vol. vi., appendix, p. 250). We need not say that it was not written by St. Augustine himself, having in our former article given reasons showing that that Father was ignorant of what, if true, would rank among the most signal miracles of the Gospel dispensation. Accordingly, the Benedictine editors have very properly excluded it from their collection of the genuine writings

^a Quinque sunt difficultates hujus loci. Prima, quid intelligatur per edificantes, &c. Bellarm. — Disp. Incolatidii. Tom. I., c. 4, de Purgatorio.

¹ August. opera. lib. de fide et operibus, c. 16, et in Ezechielion—c. 66, et alibi.

^m Lib. de fide et operibus, c. 16.

ⁿ Lib. iv., Dialogorum, c. 39.

^o Qui ad Catholicum populum Catholicæ concionantur, sed abaque eo fructu et utilitate quam Deus requirit.

¹ Lib. de fide et operibus, c. 16.

^m Lib. IV., Dialog., c. 39.

ⁿ Alii intelligunt de penis purgatorii, sed neque id recte dici potest.

^o Milner ut supra, p. 413.